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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S LIBERALS SCORN MEDVEDEV'S PROPOSED ELECTORAL REFORMS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Political liberal opposition leaders have rejected President Medvedev's proposed changes to political party laws as attacks against democracy and evidence of further consolidation of power in Russia. The head of the only independent election monitoring organization painted a bleak picture of the current state of opposition politics in Russia, on which the changes proposed by Medvedev would not improve. Post will report via septel on reactions from across the political spectrum to Medvedev's proposals. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Opposition liberal politicians have reacted sharply against changes to the political process Medvedev proposed during his November 5 annual address to Russia's upper legislative chamber, the Federation Council. Among the changes that would directly affect opposition parties are proposals to:

-- Extend the term of the president from four years to six and the term of Duma members from four to five years. (Note: It remains unclear if this would apply to the incumbent president and Duma members. Differing opinions have been presented in the media, and undoubtedly will be debated when the changes, which have already been put into the form of draft legislation, are discussed in the Duma within the next two weeks. End Note.);

-- Allot one or two Duma seats for parties that receive between 5-7 percent of the vote (Note: Based on the results of the December 2007 Duma elections, no other parties would have passed even the lower five percent barrier entitling them to a single seat in the 450 member Duma. End Note);

-- Abolish the use of cash collateral and lower the voter signature threshold for allowing parties to participate in elections and reduce the number of signatures needed to register candidates in both presidential and Duma elections (Note: No parties used the cash collateral option in the 2007 Duma elections or the 2008 regional elections, but this change likely targets Aleksandr Lebedev and other oligarchs considering political forays. Currently 250,000 signatures are required to register a candidate for the Duma and two million for the presidential election. End Note.);

-- Institute term limits on political party leaders. (Note: This appears aimed at LDPR's Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and KPRF's Gennadiy Zyuganov, whose personal charisma have buoyed their parties to the 7 percent Duma threshold. However, Zhirinovskiy told media on November 6 that he would accept a party leadership term limit since he is grooming his son to assume control of LDPR. End note.)

-- Allow the majority party in regional legislatures to nominate a candidate for governor and forward it to the president for approval (Note: United Russia is the majority in 83 of Russia's 85 regional parliaments. End Note);

¶3. (SBU) Leaders of liberal opposition parties quickly

rejected Medvedev's proposed reforms. At a November 6 press conference, organizers of Russia's new Solidarity movement blasted Medvedev's proposals as attacks against democracy and open political competition. Yabloko party chairman Sergey Mitrokhin similarly issued a statement November 5 that his party "categorically objects" as unconstitutional Medvedev's proposal to extend the president's term of office from four to six years. Garry Kasparov's United Civil Front (OGF) ridiculed the proposed changes as "nothing but a criminal plot for usurpation of power in Russia, as well as an attempt to distract public opinion from the emerging social and economic crisis in Russia." Former PM and chairman of the Russian Popular Democratic Union (RNDS) Mikhail Kasyanov accused Medvedev of failing to admit that "all the foundations of the constitutional order have been destroyed" and that citizens have no ability to influence those in power. He added that an extension of presidential or Duma terms would thus be the same whether it changes them to one year or 25-year terms. Vladimir Ryzhkov, chairman of the unregistered Republican Party, predicted that Medvedev's moves are intended to prepare Putin for a return to the presidency in 2009. The proposed changes, he added, would "further tighten control over the state machinery of civil society." The reduced voter signature requirement for parties, Ryzhkov warned, would be irrelevant when the government can always decide arbitrarily to invalidate signatures submitted by an opposition party.

¶4. (SBU) Other political commentators joined the chorus of those questioning Medvedev's gambit. Andrey Rikhter of the Institute on Media Law and Policy told us he believed Medvedev planned to use these proposals to position Putin for

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a return to the Presidency, but said that most Russians would greet the idea calmly, as the idea of a Putin restoration had been under public discussion since his second term. The public "was adapted to the idea" although "they had forgotten about it in the past year or two." Lilia Shibanova of the NGO Golos said that any rhetorical nods to democratic reform from Medvedev were merely "cosmetic." She expressed dissatisfaction with the proposal on party registration, but said that it was "a good start for dialogue." Nonetheless, she saw very few "real choices" among liberal opposition leaders, and painted a bleak picture of the current political environment.

¶5. (SBU) Both Rikhter and Shibanova identified one bright spot in Medvedev's Federation Council speech: Medvedev's attack on powerful bureaucrats whom he accused of "destroying business" in the country. According to Rikhter, Medvedev intends to take on entrenched bureaucratic power structures because of his frustration at their frequent refusal to implement federal GOR policy. Rikhter said that local bureaucrats rule the country on a de facto basis, something unacceptable both to Medvedev and to civil society organizations. Rikhter added that Medvedev's statements in favor of media freedom may go beyond mere lip service, as Medvedev specifically encouraged members of the media to criticize these same bureaucrats. The centrist daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta on November 7 carried an article about a proposal to codify the amount of time journalists must wait to obtain information from civil servants; Rikhter believes that this may prove to be Medvedev's first blow against his bureaucratic opponents, as it will require them to provide information to the media on demand. Shibanova also told us that this portion of Medvedev's speech gave her "hope," and said that under the current system she believed local authorities have too much power.

¶6. (SBU) Commentary on Medvedev's proposals from across the political spectrum continues. Post will report via septel on other perspectives on the speech and implications of the proposals it contained.

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